DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 367 143 FL 021 842

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TITLE	Second Language Learning in a Social Context. ERIC Digest.
INSTITUTION	ERIC Clearinghouse on Languages and Linguistics, Washington, D.C.
SPONS AGENCY	Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
REPORT NO	EDO-FL-94-05
PUB DATE	Jan 94
CONTRACT	RR93002010
NOTE	4p.
AVAILABLE FROM	ERIC/CLL, 1118 22nd Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses - ERIC Clearinghouse Products (071)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Cultural Awareness; *Cultural Context; Dialects; Higher Education; *Institutional Cooperation; Language Skills; Learning Activities; Letters (Correspondence); *Native Speakers; Program Descriptions; *School Community Relationship; *Second Language Learning; Skill Development; Spanish; Spanish Speaking
IDENTIFIERS	ERIC Digests; *Iowa State University; *Santa Clara University CA

ABSTRACT

This digest describes how foreign language instructors at Iowa State University of Science and Technology and Santa Clara University (California) have integrated the participation of native speakers from their communities into the curriculum in ways that allow students to practice their language skills and develop a heightened sense of cultural understanding. Activities for intermediate and advanced students, for dialect study, and for Spanish conversation classes are highlighted, and a collaborative project between advanced composition students at Iowa State and native Spanish speakers enrolled in Santa Clara University is described. (VWL)

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Second Language Learning in a Social Context

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS
CENTER FOR APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Digest

January 1994

Second Language Learning in a Social Context

(EDO-FL-94-05)

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We speak of "broadening our horizons" by studying foreign languages, yet foreign language instructors are faced with the challenge of maintaining student interest, enhancing linguistic and cultural sophistication, and creating a setting for the reading and analysis of literary texts. Within the confines of the classroom, this can be quite challenging. The instructor, therefore, must incorporate other resources from the university and the community at large. At Iowa State University of Science and Technology and Santa Clara University (CA), foreign language instructors have integrated the participation of native speakers from their communities into the curriculum in ways that allow students to practice their language skills and develop a heightened sense of cultural understanding.

In 1985, Santa Clara University established a partnership, the Eastside Project, with the primarily Hispanic and Southeast Asian community of East San Jose, California. The project services the marginalized segments of society—the homeless, the poor, the illiterate or undereducated, the elderly, and other dispossessed individuals. It was launched as an experiment in co-curricular, field-experience learning, with the goals of bringing the life experiences of the diverse members of society into the consciousness of students and faculty, listening and learning from each other, and promoting interaction between the university and the community.

Activities for Intermediate and Advanced Students

One activity that has been very successful with students in intermediate Spanish is journal writing. In Spanish, students interview Spanish-speaking members of a particular service agency involved in the project. They keep a regular journal in Spanish that includes autobiographical data, student reflections or reactions to native-informant conversations, commentaries on socio-political events in the native speaker's land of origin, linguistic barriers, and discrimination from stereotypical views of their culture. These entries can be used as a basis for small-group discussions or individual conferences. As the term progresses and the students' contact with the native informants increases, the journal entries become more complex. Many students are "adopted" by their new friends and these relationships last far beyond the class project.

At the advanced level, the focus is oriented toward complex grammatical structures and the reading and analysis of progressively more difficult literary texts, mainly contemporary short stories, which illustrate the struggles of Hispanic peoples and the universality of human experience. The language professor must help the students relate the text and the social, moral, and ethical issues it raises to personal experiences. If the students' contact with the Hispanic community has been limited to textual material and class discussion, they may not be able to discover the connection between the literary and socially active world.

After reading and discussing a variety of texts, the students are assigned a project that involves interviewing, in Spanish, a senior citizen of Hispanic origin whom they have met through the project, and recording the individual's oral history on paper. These interviews are very successful because the informants draw on personal experiences that transcend not only cultures but also decades.

Prior to the first interview, the students work in groups to formulate questions. Because many of the informants have left their native countries for reasons of political persecution, the students are cautioned to avoid frightening or offending them with questions that might appear to be intrusive. Questions such as the following enable the student and the informant to find a common point of reference: ***¿Cuál fue su primera reacción al encontrarse en un país donde no hablaba el idioma? ¿Qué es lo que más echaba de menos de su país? ¿Cuáles son las costumbres o tradiciones que trajo de su país? ¿Qué es lo que le impresionó más de los Estados Unidos? ¿Cuáles son algunas diferencias que ha notado entre su cultura y la cultura angloamericana?*** The students are not permitted to record the interviews, because a tape recorder might seem threatening or inhibit the conversational style interview the student is trying to conduct. The students must begin to depend on their ability to communicate at all levels, not only to listen to the native informant but also to engage in a meaningful dialogue.

As the students become more involved in their oral history project, they begin to notice a direct correlation between the informants' memories and the themes and characters they have studied in their literature assignments. These are no longer fictionalized characters but personal acquaintances and friends with very real names and faces living in the same area as the students.

Activities for Dialect Study

At Iowa State University, advanced students studying Hispanic dialectology were able to experience firsthand the true diversity of spoken Spanish through the use of oral dialect samples. Foreign students from various Spanish-speaking countries were contacted and their speech was recorded to be used in the classroom. To produce a carefully controlled speech sample, these students read a passage from a literary work representative of their country. A sample of natural speech was also obtained by asking the student to tell about the happiest or saddest day of their life or to tell about an experience in which they nearly died. These topics were very effective in eliciting the desired type of speech.

As the various dialect areas came under study in class, the recorded samples were used to supplement the written examples of the dialects in the textbook. Students were given a transcript of the reading portion and were asked to follow along as the tape was played. The various phonological, syntactical, morphological, and lexical characteristics of the dialect had previously been studied, so students were aware of what they should expect to hear. Students indicated on their text any of the typical features (all phonological in the reading portion) they detected. After listening to the tape

twice, the class discussed, as a group, the salient features heard. To guide students, the instructor asked the following questions: *Were the features that you detected typical of that particular dialect? Was the speaker consistent in producing these sounds? How did this speaker compare with others of the same dialect group? Could any of the differences be due to the speaker's idiolect?* A similar procedure was used to analyze the natural speech sample. The second discussion typically yielded a greater wealth of dialect variations due to its informal nature.

Because many native speakers wished to come to the class to demonstrate their dialect in person, visits were scheduled once the class had studied two to three different dialects. On the day of the visits, the native speakers were asked not to name their dialect, nor to make references to their country of birth, so that the students could use their newly acquired knowledge of dialects to determine which dialect was being spoken. Once the class reached a consensus, the students produced a list of features that they had used to identify the dialect. Further discussions followed as students asked about the speech patterns in the native region of the visitor. Since it was not unusual to have several speakers from the same country, for example, Colombia, where there are several very distinct dialect areas, students not only heard the various dialects but also heard how speakers from one area perceive speakers from another. Obviously, as occurs in every country where a variety of dialects are spoken, there are biases about people based on their dialect. Discussions progressed from the purely linguistic to the sociolinguistic; for example, the students explored the similarities and differences of stereotypes in various Spanish-speaking countries.

As part of this course, students completed an in-depth case study of a native speaker's dialect. Students researched a specific aspect of the dialect, such as phonology, morphology, syntax, or lexicon, and presented their findings to the class. The presentation included a brief taped segment of the interview with the native speaker, accompanied by a transcript.

Conversation Activities

In advanced Spanish conversation classes, the use of native speakers can enhance student interest. At Iowa State University, a group of native Spanish speakers was invited to come to the third-year conversation classes as guest speakers. Each guest was provided an outline of topics from which they could develop their talk, for example: 1) family, interests, hobbies; 2) reasons for coming to the United States; 3) first impressions of this country; 4) their hometown compared with their current place of residence; 5) their experiences learning English as a second language; and 6) suggestions to students about improving their Spanish speaking skills. Each guest met with the instructor prior to their visit to discuss topic areas that he or she had selected and to express any concerns with respect to the type of questions that the students might raise.

The students also were prepared for the visits. Each student was given a copy of the topic outline that the native speakers had received. In addition, the following points were reviewed: 1) the use of Spanish interrogatives, 2) types of verbs most likely to be used, and 3) the formulation of appropriately phrased questions. The students then rehearsed these questions with one another in class.

The day of the native speakers' visit, the class was divided into five groups of four to five students each. Each guest speaker was assigned to a group. Students were encouraged to ask questions freely, to change the subject at any time, or to let the conversation take its natural course. While the groups talked, the instructor discreetly circulated around the room and answered any questions. After 15 minutes, the guest speakers switched to another group and repeated the process. Toward the end of the session, the class reconvened as one large group and spent 15 minutes reviewing what was learned about each speaker, highlighting the information the students had found most interesting.

During this informal conversational exchange, students not only practiced their aural/oral skills, they were also exposed to various accents and diverse vocabulary. They acquired a new awareness of the challenges that immigrants encounter as they attempt to adapt to a different culture with limited skills in English.

A Collaborative Project

In 1993, foreign language instructors at Iowa State University and Santa Clara University initiated a collaborative project between advanced composition students at Iowa State and native Spanish speakers enrolled in literature courses at Santa Clara University. Students from Iowa State wrote letters to students at Santa Clara University. The goal of the project for the Iowa students was 1) to improve writing skills and increase interest in the writing process, and 2) to engage in a firsthand exchange with a student from a Hispanic group (Central Americans--largely political refugees--and Mexican Americans) not heavily represented in the Midwest. The assignment gave the California students the opportunity to correspond with another person whose background and culture were very different from their own, to learn about Midwestern culture, and to share their Hispanic heritage. The format and content of each student's letter followed stylistic and thematic guidelines, and, in the case of the Iowa students, the letter was corrected and graded before being mailed. Students at both universities were asked to describe themselves, their university, hometown, and course of study. The initial exchange was quite successful, and many students continued to correspond with their pen-pal.

Conclusion

The efforts at Iowa State University and Santa Clara University to incorporate experience-based learning into the foreign language curriculum have been far-reaching for students and faculty alike. The faculty members involved have developed new teaching strategies and have explored new topics or approaches for research. In addition, the positive results of experience-based techniques have enhanced the spirit of interdepartmental/intercollegiate communication at all levels. Yet the most important measure of success is that the students, the faculty, and the native speakers are working together to further their understanding of each other's culture, to break down stereotypes, and to build cultural bridges through an exchange of ideas, experiences, and friendships.

Resources

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This report was prepared with funding from the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Dept. of Education, under contract no. RR93002010. The opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of OERI or ED.